

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

REMEMBERING OUR LOVED ONES BACK HOME

EN101: COMPOSITION

SECTION L

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WEST POINT, NEW YORK

22 OCTOBER 2008

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ASSISTANCE RECEIVED IN COMPLETING THIS ASSIGNMENT.

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SIGNATURE:

While media and news reports focus on the military struggles abroad, they frequently forget the domestic struggles that family members left behind must contend with at home. In “Coffee” and “Preparing to Go,” author Virginia Kiernan adeptly captures the difficulties of being an Army wife. Her well-crafted story includes the unspoken stresses, questions and fears that accumulate around deployment. With her abundant details, unique writing style and voice, Kiernan guides her readers through the domestic challenges of adapting daily life around a soon-to-be fatherless and husbandless home.

Kiernan’s first story, “Coffee,” introduces the surrounding events that precede the official announcement of Verner’s deployment. Here, readers learn of the many uncertainties she has yet to resolve. At the beginning of the narrative, Kiernan wastes no time in revealing her ultimate fear as an army wife. Through the detail that a friend “would now have to live her life alone” (Kiernan 1) because of her husband’s death, Kiernan reflects on her own situation; will she be in a similar place months from now? Readers immediately realize the extraordinary stress the narrator faces in dealing with her uncontrollable future. It becomes clear that her worries can transform into a reality when Kiernan mentions that she is “attending another funeral” (1) once again. However, she refuses to accept a similar fate and thinks “*No, it won’t be me! It can’t!*” (1). This is the first instance of how Kiernan italicizes sentences throughout her narrative to capture her thoughts. Consequently, this technique personalizes her story like a diary allowing her to release suppressed emotions. After rumors circulate around Verner’s deployment, she reveals her hidden fears about “*pulling the kids out of school*”(3) or wonders whether

“[she] *can do it alone*” (4). From here, Kiernan wins over the sympathies of her audience and establishes a powerful form of pathos. After readers hear Kiernan voice her doubts and worries, they only wish to help the narrator through this troubled time and reassure her that everything will be alright. Following the announcement that “Verner is going to war,” (5) Kiernan hooks her readers emotionally, and they are compelled to read further to follow the family’s development.

In “Preparing to Go,” Kiernan covers the preparations the family makes before Verner’s departure. It first begins with the hectic briefings concerning all the logistics of being a single parent. While she is flustered over all the official documents that deployment involves, Kiernan transfers this same feeling to her readers by overwhelming them with an abundance of details that include “all the legal issues that might occur” to “getting ID cards or selling a house” (7). By the end, readers empathize with Kiernan’s situation. Although it is a monotonous chore to read about the “combat pay and hazardous duty pay” (8) logistics and bank statements that need a “spouse’s signature,” (8) these details make Kiernan’s story all the more believable. Kiernan could have simply ignored these details but the fact that she doesn’t leave anything out makes her story more realistic.

Kiernan and Verner’s relationship becomes increasingly strained as Verner’s hours away from home become more frequent. Unfortunately, Kiernan begins to realize that even quality time spent with her husband must be put on hold as “Verner’s days started getting longer” (8) with PT in the morning and briefings at night. While Verner prepares for deployment, Kiernan prepares her children for their new lives. Here, readers learn of the tough position Kiernan is in. She must be able to comfort her children “with

their fears and questions” without “burden[ing] them with too much information or scar[ing] them with some of [her] own fears” (9). Essentially, the readers feel that they are the only outlet for the author to confide her feelings with. Consequently, Kiernan strengthens her connection with the audience by drawing them closer through her dependence on them.

Near the end of “Preparing to Go,” Virginia includes a poem that sums what I believe is the underlying theme of her narrative; though she may feel scared about Verner’s deployment, she will always be his proud Army wife. This can be seen in the poem’s stanza regarding a wife’s perspective of deployment:

I am a strong and loving wife, with a husband soon to go.
 There are times I’m terrified in a way most never know.
 I bite my lip and force a smile as I watch my husband pack
 My heart may break, but I am proud. My husband’s got your back.

(Kiernan 10)

By including this poem, readers start to understand the motive behind military families and why they are willing to cope with this enormous amount stress. It is their unwavering desire to serve in the nation’s forces and protect the freedoms Americans enjoy. The Kiernan family has reconciled that the stresses and anxieties are only a small price to pay for answering their country’s call to duty. While Virginia realizes that “to spend some quality time with [Verner]...would be impossible” (8) following deployment, she also concludes that this is a sacrifice that needs to be made for the sake of a greater good. With this realization and her prayers to God, Kiernan finally finds her inner “pillar of strength” (14) that will guide her through the new life at the end of the story.

Now, I am given the monumental task of critiquing such a well-written story. I want to highlight what Kiernan did exceptionally well. First of all, Kiernan makes both of her stories very accessible to readers. She expands on what the various military acronyms mean. For instance, in order to clarify a brigade wife's duty, Kiernan explains "she was a MUC wife (pronounced muck). MUC was an acronym for Major Unit Commander. The responsibilities of an Army officer's wife were similar to the inherent expectations placed upon you when your husband is in politics" (3). Kiernan also works in background information about the origins of military lingo and phrases. Verner's battalion is humorously named "Balls of the Eagles" in recognition "to the unit's distinguished service in Vietnam" (11). From details like these, Kiernan solidifies the base of her ethos by demonstrating a wealth of knowledge about even the smallest details concerning both the military and military life. Readers can undoubtedly trust the author and look to her for the clarification and the truth. Furthermore, Kiernan's thoroughness allows both an audience of army families and civilians to read the story with relative ease.

If there was a place for improvement, I would suggest to Kiernan to maintain a greater degree of focus on her family's interactions as Verner's deployment day nears. At times, I felt that the stories and details of other families might have detracted from the narrative regarding her family. Although anecdotes concerning wives' vows to "find [Captain Marton] a wife" (6) offer lighthearted humor within the narrative, I felt this detail, and others like it, lead the reader off on a tangent. I became more interested in how Verner and Kiernan planned to "spend some quality time" so that "[their] relationship tanks would be full" (8). Additionally, it would have been nice to read the final exchanges Verner made before his departure and what he did to reassure the rest of the

family that daddy would be okay. By including these details, I think readers would have felt more closure by the end of Kiernan's story. However, these suggestions are only suggestions. In fact, I may be proposing ideas that would hurt Kiernan's narrative if she did not intend to include personal details surrounding her last days with Verner.

While other war stories may be action-filled in terms of explosions and firefights, Kiernan's stories offer a unique perspective of an internal struggle that many readers do not know about. Often times, we forget that war takes a physically and mentally exhausting toll not only on soldiers but on the families of soldiers as well. I am glad that Kiernan has written such a thorough narrative about the difficult life of an army wife. She isn't afraid to reveal her weakness and express her own doubts about being a single mother. Because of this, I felt a greater degree of intimacy and a deeper connection with the author. Her worries about "what happens if they don't make it home" (14) also become my worries. Thus, it is all the more frustrating to be in the passive role of a reader. I do not know whether or not Kiernan has had any prior experiences in writing short-story narratives, but I do know that she has been able to capture my heart and my emotions in a way that many authors cannot.

The beauty of her story is how Kiernan leaves the reader feeling near the end of it. Her story gave me a greater appreciation for my family back at home. More importantly, it has made me aware of the extraordinary burden all military families must bear during war. At times, I wish I could sit down next to Kiernan and alleviate all her stresses, quell her fears and tell her that everything will work out after the war is over. However, I can't. I can only offer her words of encouragement and a prayer for the best.

Works Cited

Kiernan, Virginia. "Coffee."

Kiernan, Virginia. "Preparing to Go."